



## SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

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By Linda Ranson Jacobs

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### ***Introduction: From the Seventies – Children Are Resilient***

In the early seventies our world changed dramatically. Divorce, while it had always been around, was kept fairly quiet. All of that changed when Ronald Regan signed the no fault divorce law in California. Like a speeding bullet divorce took aim at the families of America. Ronald Regan had no way of knowing that this one law would change our society in monumental ways.

Immediately I was thrown into the divorce arena when after moving to California I was placed in a low-income school where the majority of the children came from broken homes. I began to witness parents of the children in our school remarrying only to divorce again. Or I watched as uncle after uncle moved in and out of the homes. Fathers on the other hand just called their girlfriends live-ins. I began taking mental notes and studying the child of divorce.

The general consensus at that time was that children were resilient. They would suffer for a short while and then they would be okay. Many people thought if the parents would quickly remarry this would give the child a two-parent family then things would be even better.

I have kept in touch or kept track of some of the children I worked with back in the early 70s. For the children that had extended family support and church family support their outcomes are much better than ones that didn't. Escapism seemed to be the route many took and still take today. Some accomplished this through dependence on drugs, alcohol and changing partners.

Even the children that seemed to process the divorce fairly well tell me they are still affected today. A few years ago I had the opportunity to visit with one young man. He had a chance to look over the DivorceCare for Kids curriculum program that I had developed. After looking at the various components he said,

*“Oh boy, this really brings back a lot of memories. I thought I had gotten over this but seeing these things and reading some of this really is hitting me hard. You know?”*

And it was the look on his face that was so amazing. I saw that little 6 year-old kid that I had worked with when his parents divorced.



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We now know from many years of research that even though children are resilient, divorce takes its toll. Judith Wallerstein, a psychologist in southern California has done a long-term study on children and divorce. She studied 131 children for five years, then ten years and finally 25 years. At each juncture she wrote a book about these children and their experiences, their feelings and how they were getting along in the post divorce years.

What she has learned has changed the way the mental health industry looks at the child of divorce. After the 25 year report she discovered that almost all of the children experienced what she calls ‘the sleeper effect.’ In other words the divorce affected many of these children in their adults years more than when they were children. The divorce left residual scars. The wounds healed but the scars will be there forever.

### ***Normal Development***

In order to help you understand the spiritual development, let’s start with quickly discussing normal development of children. There have been books written and college classes conducted about child development so I am only going to briefly go over this.

There are typically four areas that early childhood teachers are concerned with. These are the physical, emotional/social, cognitive and spiritual development. When a child is an infant they learn to roll over, pull up, sit up, crawl and then walk. As they learn and grow they develop fine motor skills and gross motor skills. They learn to run and jump and participate with others.

In the area of emotional development even an infant feels the love of a parent. Children begin to connect with their primary care givers. They depend on their parent or other caregivers to meet their needs of hunger, thirst and other wants and desires. They learn to trust the adults in their lives. For children that miss out on learning to trust the adults in their lives, the development of their conscious is deeply affected. When a child can’t trust those around them they will draw into themselves and learn to only trust themselves. It is very difficult if almost impossible to help the attachment disorder child.

Children will pick up on the different feelings of happiness, anger, sadness and other emotions those around them are experiencing. Small babies will smile when smiled at or they will scrunch up their little faces when frowned upon.

Cognitive development includes seeing, feeling, touching and tasting things. As they grow into preschool age, children will duplicate actions such as stacking blocks and then knocking them over. Through their play and experiences they learn cause and effect. They learn colors, numbers, letters, shapes and how the world works. Their minds are sponges that soak up anything presented to them.





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In the realm of spiritual development children develop a curiosity for Jesus and God. However, they can only think from concrete experiences. They will question,

*“How does Jesus get in your heart? Doesn’t that hurt when he gets in your heart. My grandpa had a heart attack and he hurt! Is that gonna happen to me if I ask Jesus into my heart?”*

Children will follow the parent’s lead. When parents talk about God and Jesus, the child will imitate this talk. When parents pray, the children will pray. Later the child develops the ability to understand and relate to abstract concepts and thinking. They develop trust and faith first of all toward their parents and then later for God. Trust and faith are feelings that are transferred from trusting and believing in their parent to trusting and having faith in God.

For years we have had research that has delved into the various stages of physical, emotional and cognitive development in children. But very rarely has anyone researched the spiritual development of children who have experience the divorce of their parents. Now that they have become adults, we are also learning from those “resilient kids” about the divorce of their parents. And what we are hearing is that many of these kids were not so resilient after all. Jen Abbas, “[Generation Ex: Adult Children of Divorce and the Healing of Our Pain](#)”, Elizabeth Marquardt, “[Between Two Worlds: The Inner Lives of Children of Divorce](#)”, and Kristine Steakley, “[Child of Divorce, Child of God: A Journey of Hope and Healing](#)”, Andrew Root, “[Children of Divorce, The: The Loss of Family as the Loss of Being \(Youth, Family, and Culture\)](#)” are some of the authors that are young adults who grew up in divorced homes.

What they have to say is monumental in understanding some of these issues. But before we go into what the adults of divorce are saying, I want to lay some foundation about how children in our world connect and what’s lacking in the connection part of our society. This will tie into understanding the spiritual development of children torn apart by the divorcing adults in their world and we will have a look at that next week.

*ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Linda Ranson Jacobs is one of the forefront leaders in the area of children and divorce. She developed and created the DivorceCare for Kids programs. DC4K is an international program for churches to use to help children of divorced parents find healing within the arms of a loving church family. As a speaker, author, trainer, program developer and child care center owner, Linda has assisted countless families by modeling and acting on the healing love she has found in Jesus Christ. More great articles about how to successfully minister to the child of divorce in your church can be found at Linda’s website [Healthy Loving Partnerships for Our Kids \(HLP4\) \[http://www.hlp4.com\]](http://www.hlp4.com). Linda also offers support, encouragement, and suggestions to help single parents and those working with single parent children. She can be reached by e-mail at [Linda@hlp4.com](mailto:Linda@hlp4.com).*

